Ward, Ada L.
My greatest adventure

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My Greatest Adventure

ADA L. WARD, LL. A.

Price 25 Cents

My Greatest Adventure

(Third Printing)

ADA L. WARD, LL. A.

PRICE, 25 CENTS

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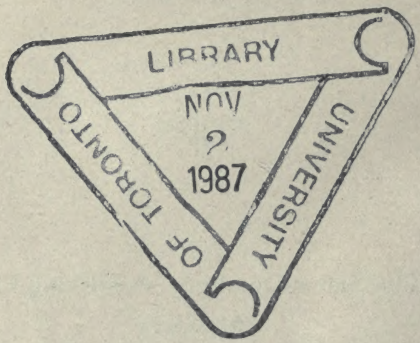


Miss Ward and Her Blackboard

My Greatest Adventure

I

THE CALL TO ACTION

It came in a very ordinary way, just as a telephone call. I was sitting in my office one Monday afternoon, when my telephone bell rang, and a voice said: "Can you be ready to go to France on Saturday? We are sending out a concert party to entertain the soldiers. We have already a quartette of two ladies and two gentlemen singers, a violinist and a pianist, and we are just short of a—well—a *comic turn!!* We have already had a conjurer, a ventriloquist, and an elocutionist, and now the boys are wanting a change. One of them has written from France to say: 'Try and get hold of Ada Ward and her blackboard, and send her along.'"

Within half an hour of receiving that telephone message, I was being interviewed by Miss Lena Ashwell, a brilliant English actress, who is the very soul of this great work of entertaining our troops on active service. My only previous acquaintance with her had been as a distant admirer on this side the footlights. It was good to meet her face to face and to find her a gracious, charming and loving woman, as well as a clever actress.

I think I must have given a certain amount of preliminary satisfaction for she told me to go to the Foreign Office next day and put in an application for my passport. I did so, and was told it would be ready for me in forty-eight hours. In the meantime I had to be interviewed by another

lady, Princess Helena Victoria, President of the Society of "Concerts at the Front," who takes a keen and active interest in the work, and sees and hears each artist who goes out there.

I cannot say I looked forward to that interview. I am not nervous, but I think I approached nervousness as nearly as ever I shall that Wednesday afternoon, when I drove up to that West-end mansion in a taxicab, with my blackboard, easel, pegs, chalk and duster.

When I was shown into the drawing room, there was an audience of two, both women, the Princess and Miss Ashwell. That surely was an ordeal. I am happiest in large rooms with crowded audiences. I like a platform, and an easy exit. Yet here I was in an ordinary drawing room, no platform, no eager, crowded audience, no comfortable exit. I was on a level with my hearers, just two individuals of my own sex, always the most ruthlessly critical, one a Royal Princess, the other a brilliant actress. I felt stupid, awkward, artificial. I felt as if I were wearing cotton gloves, with a hole in every finger, and elastic side shoes with flat heels, square toes, and the elastic all worn out!

I need have had no apprehensions. The Princess was just a lovely, womanly woman, keenly interested in my blackboard pictures and stories. Miss Ashwell was merry and bright. my little entertainment "passed" these two critical censors, and I was told to be ready for France on the Saturday. Before leaving England, my passport had to be viséd by both British and French military authorities, who granted me permission to enter the war zone of the combatant armies.

AN AUDIENCE OF CONVALESCENTS BEHIND THE LINES

I met the rest of the artistes at Waterloo Station on the Saturday evening. We were soon en route, soon across the dreaded Channel, soon landed in fair, sunny, war-worn, shell-shattered, weary France, and our work began at once. No slackers there!!

II

"CROWDED HOURS OF GLORIOUS LIFE"

Our first concert was given to an audience of wounded soldiers in a large hospital tent. When we arrived they were already assembling. Some were being brought in on beds and stretchers, some were being wheeled in, in bath chairs, some were limping in on crutches, some, alas, groping in. All were battered, shattered, broken and bandaged. When I saw them, those dear boys, who had left us so well, so strong, so physically fit, saw them there so helpless, I wondered how I was going to be a "*comic stunt,*" with a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. It was my first experience among the wounded, and I shall never forget it. Since then, I have entertained hundreds, nay thousands, of them, but that first audience stands out in my mind clear as a "movie" film. There was one poor boy close to the platform. They brought him as near to us as they could. All we could see of him was just one eye! The rest of him was bandages. Really he looked more like a mummy than a living human being. Yet bandaged and shattered though he was, he managed to give me *a wink* with

his one eye!! Two other boys were sitting near. One had lost his right arm, the other his left. They arranged to sit together, so they *might clap each other's remaining hand.* Another boy came to me with his thumb and two fingers gone from his right hand. With a twinkle in his eye, and a chuckle in his throat, he said: "It doesn't matter, 'cause I'm *left-handed"!*

Such is their spirit. Never was there a brighter, cheerier audience. Every boy had done his duty, his bit. He had faced Hell in those awful trenches. Surely the hospital is Heaven. It was indeed a privilege, a joy to do anything to make them forget their sufferings, even for one brief hour.

After the concert, we had afternoon tea with the matron and sisters of the hospital, those charming women in that pretty uniform we love so well. Truly if the hospital is Heaven, these are the ministering angels. Doctors and surgeons were present too, keen and clever, devoting their knowledge of medicine and surgery to the service of the wounded, full of enthusiasm for their work, never weary of telling of the marvelous cures being wrought, of the patience and courage of the men under their care. To meet these wonderful medical officers, to talk to them was a delight and an inspiration. I could have spent the rest of my tour at that one hospital centre.

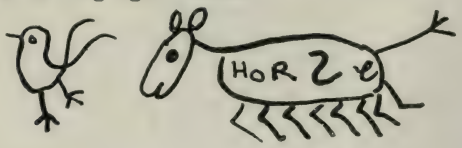
But there was much work waiting for us to do. As soon as tea was over, automobiles were waiting to take us miles away to a military camp where our evening concerts were to be given. When we arrived at the hut or tent, we found it packed, crammed to the very doors, with eager, excited,

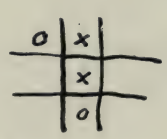
perspiring, suffocating Tommies, *all smoking,* every single one of 'em! Think of the atmosphere. It became thicker and thicker, and bluer and bluer until by the end of the evening, we couldn't see across the room. It was like pea soup! What an audience that was, and what a concert. Our artistes were on their mettle. The magnetic attention of those soldier boys brought out the very best in us. We gave them the lovely quartettes from Gilbert and Sullivan's operas, the best songs in our language and beautiful instrumental pieces. For the time being war and its sufferings, its horrors and discomforts were completely forgotten. The appreciation was intense, the demand for encores insistent and tremendous, not one or two, but three, four, five and even six. Often and often our artistes have sung as many as fifteen songs a day each. And if you are going to France, you must have a pretty extensive repertoire. For Tommy chooses his own encores, and woe betide the artiste who cannot comply. From every part of the room come requests: "Give us 'Annie Laurie' please miss." "No, don't. Give us 'A Little Bit o' Heaven.' We've had so much of the other place." "Sing us 'The Rosary.'" "'Perfect day,' please miss." "No, sing us 'Ipswich' miss, then we'll all join in the chorus." "Yes, 'Ipswich,' 'Ipswich'"!! This was a great favorite on our tour. It was an experience to hear those big men roaring out the chorus:

"Which switch is the switch, Miss, for Ipswich?
It's the Ipswich switch which I require.
Which switch switches Ipswich with this switch?
You've switched my switch on the wrong wire.
You've switched me on Northwich, not Ipswich,
So now to prevent further hitch
If you'll tell me which switch is Northwich
And which switch is Ipswich
I'll know which switch is which."

Of course, by the end of the song, they had lost all count of the "switches," and it was just a series of "Switch, switch, switch." Never mind. Tommy had his own way, and that's everything to a soldier.

But when they saw my blackboard coming on to the platform, they didn't like it. They had had blackboards before, and they didn't associate them with a comic stunt. In fact I believe they thought they were going to *learn* something, and that *would* have been a tragedy! I believe they expected a map, or some arithmetic, or a plan of the trenches. A storm of school-boy protest invariably greeted the little "school marm" and her blackboard. So, in order to win their confidence, and to assure them I was not there for their *good,* I always used to begin my little turn with some funny little stories and some quaint little pictures, such as they themselves used to draw on the dear dirty old slates of long ago. Thus:





These quickly allayed their apprehensions, won their hearts, just turning them into big laughing, rollicking school-boys, ready to enjoy any further sketches I could give them.

Then came our National Anthem, sung as only an army of soldiers can sing their country's great hymns. That closed our entertainment. The room was cleared and ventilated for a few minutes. Then another crowd of eager, excited, perspiring boys poured in, all smoking, everyone of them. Those at the first concert had had pink tickets, these at the second house had yellow ones, so that no boy should see the show twice. *But many did!!* So we went on with our concert again, right from the quartette down to the National Anthem. That was our work every day, three times a day, hospital and convalescent camp in the afternoon; at nights huts, tents, hotels, wharves, docks, casinos, theatres, schools, convents, monasteries, deserted factories, laundries, railway trucks, under the ground, in the open air, wherever there were soldiers we took our music and our fun. It wasn't easy. It was difficult. It was trying. By the end of the tour, we were tired out. Our voices were almost gone, and we were absolutely smoke-cured, kip-

pered!! Our hair, clothing, handkerchiefs, everything smelt of tobacco smoke. But we loved our work, every minute of it, and I think the joy of my life came next year when the "boys" wrote for Ada Ward to go again, not as a ten minutes' item on a concert programme, but as a *one-man show*. So I went out again with my precious blackboard, and month after month I gave my illustrated entertainments, week in, week out, Sundays and week days alike—week days my funny pictures and merry stories, Sundays my Bible pictures and stories. Never have I thanked God so much for my gifts of humor, of caricature and for my splendid health as in those amazing days when I was privileged to minister to the finest audience in the whole wide world.

Truly it was the greatest adventure of an exciting and adventurous life, stirring the blood, quickening the pulse, making one feel that after all life had been well worth while.

III

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

Such then was our work, but of course it was varied by many wonderful experiences, some intensely pathetic, some thrilling, some comical, some heart breaking, all fascinating, all interesting.

I shall never forget one very dramatic incident. It happened in the very midst of one concert. The boys were in a most uproarious mood that night, singing "Ipswich" at the very top of their voices, when suddenly I saw a big, fine, handsome sergeant pushing his way right up the middle of the room.

Now the boys are so keen on these concerts, so anxious not to miss a single word, that the slightest unnecessary interruption is vehemently resented. So when I saw this big fellow elbowing his way through the crowd *unchallenged,* I realized there was something serious, though what it was I could not tell. But as soon as the men caught sight of him, the silence that fell over that merry throng was terrible. The music died away into a deadly stillness, and I could almost hear my own heart beat as the dread messenger approached the platform. As he drew nearer, I could see every member of that khaki-clad audience bend forward to catch the words that were to fall from that big sergeant's lips. It was like the wind blowing across a field of grain. We who were sitting on the platform were the first to hear his message. Saluting the Colonel, who was taking the chair for us, he just said: "Coldstream Guards, Sir." The Colonel stood up and said: "Any men of the Coldstreams present? FALL IN." Without a moment's hesitation, big, grand, splendid fellows stood up, and went out. *They were wanted immediately in the trenches.* Think of the contrast: Indoors, music, merriment, comradeship, light; out there darkness, death in a hundred terrible forms. How could we go on with our concert, how pick up the threads of our merriment? I said to the pianist: "Play the National Anthem, let's finish." Some of the men caught my words. "Did she say 'National Anthem. Finish?' half way through a concert, because a few chaps were called away on duty? No fear. Go on, Miss, it's all right. Go on. Carry on!"

They gave a clap and a cheer for the lads who were leaving. There was a little more room for those who were standing. Such is the world's way. We cannot stop because a few slip out into the dark. Carry on! Go on! God grant when the last great call comes to each of us to "Fall in" we may be as ready, as willing and as prepared as those splendid boys who that night left our music to face that other deadlier music.

An amusing incident occurred on another evening. I was giving my illustrated lecture: "Faces in the Crowd." The rush was terrific. The men surged into the hut and filled every available space. They crowded into the window seats, swarmed on to the platform till there was barely a square yard of space left for me and my blackboard. Some of them even climbed on to a rafter supporting the roof. Others followed their example. They clung to one another's legs, they squeezed and crowded till at last the rafter could stand it no longer. Down it came with its cargo of wriggling humans. Part of the roof came with it. I surely brought the house down for once in my life! I surveyed the dusty mass of squirming Tommies struggling in a heap on the floor. I feared some of them were hurt. But the others called out eagerly: "It's all right, Miss. Carry on. Go on. No casualties! Go on!! Again that cry: "Go on, go on."

Our longest day, our hardest day and I think our happiest, was the day when the automobiles came for us just after breakfast, and took us away from the camps, the bases, the towns, away from civilization altogether, up, up towards the firing line. Here

A TYPICAL CONCERT PARTY AT THE FRONT

we entertained the men who are working at a horse's hospital behind the trenches. Every week there is an average of five hundred wounded horses sent to this hospital, suffering from bullet and shrapnel wounds, broken limbs, shell shock, and here they are tenderly nursed back to health. When I say *nursed,* don't conjure up a vision of sweetfaced women in white caps and pretty uniforms. They are very rough men. In many cases, the only reason they are there at all, is that they love and understand a horse, or they can manage a mule and if you can manage an army mule, *you can manage anything on the face of the earth!*

Their appreciation of our visit was tremendous. Very rarely do they come in touch with the outside world. Our concert was an event, a red letter day. The crowd was so great, that neither hut nor tent would hold them. We could not disappoint them, so solved the problem by giving the concert in the open air. The men sat down on the grass, and we artistes entertained from a little hillock. I shall never forget that sea of upturned, eager faces. They loved every minute of the entertainment. When it came to my turn it began to rain! Now talking and chalking in the open air in a rainstorm is not at all an easy matter, and my pictures began to weep in chalky streams. I hesitated for a moment, not knowing what to do, and the men thought I was afraid of the weather.

"Go on, Miss, carry on. It's only rain. 'Taint bullets. 'Taint shrapnel. We don't stop for rain in war time. Go on!"

Then one of them suddenly realized my dilemma. He picked up a big horse blanket,

held it over the blackboard, a pal held the other end, and so I went on under this little improvised tent. And it was just then that a tiresome, ubiquitous Press photographer took a snapshot, and I never knew until I returned to England and saw my picture in the newspaper! Never mind, Tommy had *his* picture and nothing else mattered. At the close of the concert a special treat was offered to us. We were invited to witness an operation on a horse!!

After tea, we motored another twenty-five miles nearer to the firing line, where we entertained another section of the same army corps. These men were engaged in even more monotonous work than the ones we had just left. All day long from morning to night they are just dealing with fodder, loading and unloading, chopping up hay and oats for the horses. Just hay and oats, oats and hay! It gets on one's brain like a delirium. Think what our concert meant to these men, many of them taken straight from the docks of England and put into khaki. Many a rough face softened, many a furtive tear was dashed away with toil-worn hand as the tender strains of the home music swept from our hearts into theirs.

Yes, they may be rough, but they are lovable as children, gentle as women. I remember one big fellow tenderly nursing the dirtiest, stickiest, tiniest, wretchedest, blackest and smelliest kitten I had even seen in my life. The poor little thing had lost its mother, and wandered in among the soldiers. It could not have chosen a better sanctuary. I said to him: "What on earth are you doing with that awful kitten?" "Why Miss," he

said, "A bloke must have summat ter love. The wives ain't here, the kids ain't here, and yer carn't love one another, can yer? Who could love that silly blighter?" affectionately indicating a pal close by.

Their gratitude for our work was pathetic. At the close of the concert one dear, big, shy boy came up to me in a very mysterious, embarrassed manner, and said: "Can I speak to yer for a minute, Miss?" "Certainly," I replied. Often and often the boys had made me the confidante of some little love affair, and I thought it was going to happen again. But no. This one was different—so anxious to get me away from his comrades, from my fellow artistes, and at length successfully manœuvered me into a quiet little corner behind the tent. Here he stood first on one foot, then on the other, while I waited ill at ease. Really, I don't know which of the two of us looked the sillier! Finally, he blurted out: "Well, are yer keepin' company with anybody?"

There's gratitude! So keenly had he enjoyed my work that he was willing to bestow his hand, his heart and his name on a poor, unworthy travelling concert artiste! It was beautiful!!

We had our supper in a little dark tent, just illumined by stable lanterns. No tablecloth adorned our repast, but our kindly hosts had made the table as attractive as they could. They had gath-

ered sweet peas, just nipped the heads off, and arranged them in pretty patterns all over the table. It was charming.

They had an idea, too, at the back of their dear, rough heads that artistes, lady artistes, should have bouquets. So they presented me with a wonderful bouquet, which they had made themselves, —and their idea of a bouquet was how many flowers they could get into it. So they had gathered thousands and thousands of sweet peas, crammed them, jammed them, squashed them, put a mighty holly-hock in the centre, and tied the lot together with an enormous piece of white ribbon. Tears and smiles struggled for the mastery as I saw their offering of love approaching. The flowers have died long ago, but the memory of that kindly action will never die, and among my most treasured possessions is that famous bow of white satin ribbon which brings back so gracious a recollection.

When supper was over, we found the men lined up in a double guard of honour, from the door of the tent, to the door of our car, singing their regimental song: "Here we come gathering oats and hay, oats and hay, oats and hay!" Just as we were going to step into the car, one of them said: "I say, mates, let's take the 'orses out, and shove." Well, there are no " 'orses" in an auto, so they persuaded our driver not to start the engine, and *they pushed us for a quarter of a mile!* Such is

their gratitude. Such was our experience all along the line, sunshine and shadow, tears and smiles, joy and sorrow, life and death all strangely blended into that great adventure.

IV

AU REVOIR

A very memorable day was the 4th of August, 1916, the second anniversary of the declaration of war. To commemorate the occasion we arranged to decorate the crosses on the graves in the little cemetery where our fallen heroes were laid to rest. A fresh wreath of flowers was made for each cross. Never shall I forget the sight as the afternoon sunshine flashed a golden glory over those cross-crowned, flower-laden graves. When the beautiful ceremony was over, I walked round and read the names on those crosses, the regiments, the dates of death, and most pathetic of all, the ages—boys of eighteen, twenty, twenty-two, twenty-five, all laid here silent and still, their work over, just at life's beginning, dear, young lads who would have made such good fathers, such splendid citizens. Yet here was no sense of death, but rather a consciousness of vigorous life, a glorious triumphant abounding vitality. The very air seemed vibrant with their pulsating electric influence. They are not dead; they are alive, working, watching, waiting, hoping. And I had rather be with them, rather my body were laid with their's in the fields of France, Flanders and Gallipoli, and have my SOUL FREE, than have my body well, and my soul crushed

under the heels of Prussian militarism. Honour and liberty are grander than life, greater than death.

Our last night in France was memorable. We gave our concert in a big French theatre. This was the only concert in our whole tour where a small charge was made to help our funds. The place was packed from floor to ceiling. To me that night was the realization of a childish dream. As a tiny girl in a northern moorland village of England I had mused on this. I meant to be an actress—a great actress—not merely in England, but in France. My dream was to act in a French theatre, to see it packed with admiring crowds, all listening to *me*, and above all I must be wearing a pretty dress! And here it was realized! Little did I think under what conditions it would be consummated, and that the steady boom of the thundering guns would be its dread accompaniment. Here I was in a French theatre—crowded—everybody listening. I had a pretty dress on, yes, and the dream went on, for I saw a movement in the wings. I saw a lovely bouquet of crimson roses coming to me, brought by a boy in khaki, such a charming boy, and as he presented the bouquet to me with such a gallant salute, I nearly said to him: "Are yer keepin' company with anybody?"

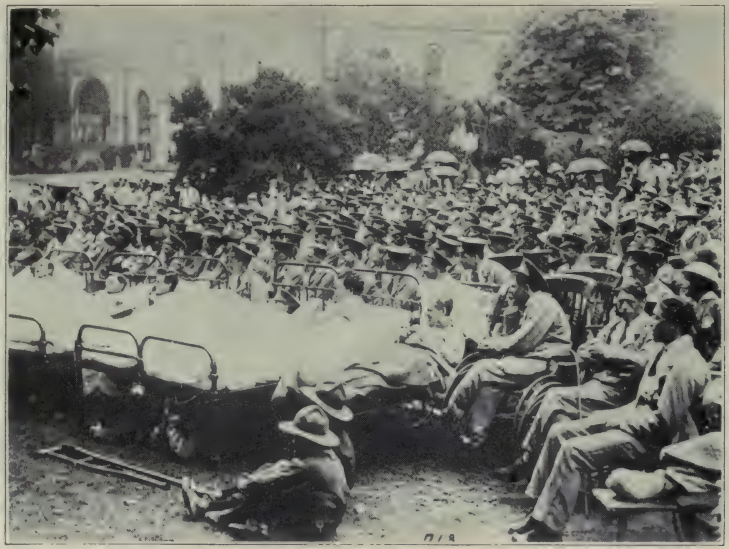
At the close of the concert the brigadier-general of the whole district stood up and said: "We want to thank you for the splendid work you have done. It has been a tonic for the sick, a stimulant for the well. We wish to say 'Thank you' in a special way. So we have had a little collection among the officers. We haven't given much, but

we have succeeded in raising two hundred pounds (one thousand dollars). Here it is—a cheque—only a *scrap of paper,* but IT WILL BE HONORED. Take it back to England with you, give it to Miss Ashwell, and tell her to use it for her splendid work, to go on sending out more of these concert parties."

So ended my tour on that note: "Go on," the slogan, the watchword of our boys over yonder, the message they gave me to all you over here. GO ON! Any one can go on for a month, anyone can keep the steam up for six weeks. It takes big men, big women to go on through the weary months and years, to go on when the first enthusiasm has died away when the first thrill, the first glamour of patriotic ardour have passed away. The testing time comes when the heart is stricken and bleeding, when sacrifice and suffering have taken their toll.

Go on! I charge you by the sacred memories of the dead boys out yonder, by the mute appeals of the maimed and suffering, by the splendid courage and patience of the living and the strong, go on!

Go on till oppression and injustice shall be crushed under the feet of a righteous and victorious peace, till a noble democracy shall rise triumphant, "till the day dawn and the shadows flee away." GO ON!



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